

To What Extent do Chinese International Students at a Higher Education Institution in New Zealand Find Online Learning Motivating or Demotivating?

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Abstract: The online learning model is rapidly becoming a new way of learning. As with any learning model, learner motivation needs to be carefully monitored as it is one of the most influential factors on student learning. Within this growing group of online learners are international students, and their motivation levels are important for their learning. With a large proportion of international students in higher education in New Zealand, the international student population cannot be ignored. This study explored the experiences of Chinese international students' motivation levels in an online learning environment at an established higher education institution in New Zealand. This study used a mixed methods approach to understand students' motivation and engagement when learning online at a higher education institution in New Zealand. The analysis of Chinese international students' views and experiences will provide educators in higher education institutions with useful insights into how the use of online learning can increase or decrease Chinese international students' motivation.

Keywords: Online Learning; Motivation; International Students

1. Introduction

Online learning provides students with new learning options, for example, since the outbreak of COVID-19, most countries have had to use online forms of instruction for learning activities and most higher education institutions can only conduct online learning activities for students and staff. Due to New Zealand's initially restrictive border policy, most international students are unable to enter New Zealand for on-campus study and are therefore forced to study online. Student motivation is important in online classes because students study alone, rarely interact face-to-face with instructors or peers^[1]. Meanwhile, motivation and engagement in online learning environments has not received much attention in educational research, as most educators have traditionally focused on students' cognition while ignoring emotions and social-emotional processes^[2]. As online learning becomes more common, it is important that educators and higher education institutions focus on students' motivation when learning online.

2. Background

Previous studies conducted on online learning and students' motivation when learning online noted that motivation is an extremely important factor for human learning behaviour, as it significantly influences students' performance and learning processes^[3-4]. Motivation is equally important in online learning or distance learning environments. Researchers have shown that motivation influences what, how, and when students learn during online learning^[5-6]. In addition to previous research discussing the importance of motivation, most researchers note the challenges and strengths international students face when learning online and the factors that influence students' motivation and engagement.

It is worth noting that while the number of studies exploring student motivation in online learning environments has increased, the number of studies addressing the motivation of international student populations when learning online is

lacking, especially in the New Zealand context. Moreover, even though most studies have discussed the international student population, attention has primarily focused on the challenges international students face when learning online, with few studies specifically discussing international students' motivations to learn. The motivations of international and domestic students may differ significantly, because international students often have clear goals when studying abroad^[7], thus different groups of students may have different levels of motivation. This research can provide solutions for the problems that have arisen regarding Chinese international students' motivation when learning online.

3. Reasons affecting the motivation of Chinese international students to study online

This study used a mixed research approach to administer a questionnaire to 55 international students from China studying at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and to interview three respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. All the collected data were analyzed in this study to find several factors that affect the motivation of international students from China.

3.1 Preference for Face-to-Face Communication

A key finding of the current study was that autonomous aspects of SDT learning were key to the motivation and engagement levels of participants^[8]. For example, several participants indicated that communication affected their motivation and engagement levels. Some participants identified that it was only when the lecturers or their peers invited them to communicate, that they became engaged in their online classroom. It was because they needed to be passively invited by others rather than engaging themselves, that participants lacked autonomy in online learning. Few participants felt that online learning made communication easier, despite that the online learning mode brought the convenience of time or space to some extent. The current study found that asynchronous communication was not preferred by the students, because students were unaware of the intention of the writer as they could not read the body language of the writer when reading text alone. The participants said they liked to talk in synchronous discussions. It is worth noting that more participants emphasised that they preferred peer and teacher–student communication in the face-to-face learning condition, and were less likely to prefer communication in the online learning environment. Even if participants tried to preserve and ensure quality communication, online written conversations cannot achieve the effectiveness of face-to-face communication^[9]. This means that factors in the online learning environment that are not beneficial to student communication, such as interruptions, will make it more difficult for students connect emotionally with their peers around them.

3.2 Subjective Experience of Interaction

There is a difference between communication and interaction, and this difference is especially apparent in an online learning environment. Communication in online learning is defined as a basic level of discussion in an online format in which students can discuss readings or course content and communicate asynchronously or synchronously via email and chat rooms^[10]. However, interaction can support all learners because with interaction, learners can address learning needs in their own way and the instructor can respond to students' questions and can develop a conversation from them, thus allowing more relevant questions to be addressed^[11].

Participants indicated that they would prefer to have a whispered conversation with their peers as they would in an offline classroom, rather than communicating in a Zoom session by just typing in a chat box, as talking directly in Zoom would certainly tend to disturb others. Therefore, when participants did not have the opportunity to interact with their peers, they lost their emotional connection to their peers, and participants became less motivated to learn and more unwilling to participate in online classroom activities. This finding is supported by the theory of relatedness of SDT^{[8][12]}, where people are less motivated when they do not feel an emotional connection to those around them. Participants did not feel a strong sense of relatedness in the online learning environment, and therefore, were less motivated to learn. The

finding of the current study also supports previous studies on interactions in online learning environments. Kuh and Hu's (2001) study found that interaction between students and lecturers has an impact on student engagement^[13].

3.3 Lecturers' Teaching Style

The current research found that students' situational interest in learning affected their engagement and motivation in learning^[14]. Some participants in the current study felt that sometimes lecturers did not notice that they were not engaged or focused on classroom learning, and that the content of lecturers' lessons was sometimes too confusing and difficult to understand in an online classroom setting, for example, the lecturer's writing on the screen was so confusing that it was difficult to read. In this case, participants felt that it was more difficult for them to maintain a high level of motivation.

In addition, the research indicated that the lecturer's teaching style also influences students' extrinsic motivation^[12]. Participants in this study pointed out that the apparent boredom and the disinterest of the lecturer's teaching style and course content kept them demotivated to learn, and most of the lecturers did not take measures to motivate their students. Participants said they lost interest in the lecturer's content and studied only to take exams or complete assignments, and their extrinsic motivation remained low. As a result, the instructor's influence is important for students' extrinsic motivation because extrinsic motivation is used by the instructor and the instructor's behaviour can influence students' motivation^[15].

3.4 Level of Technology Support

The term "technology" here refers to the online learning environment. The current study was conducted to understand the extent to which participants were motivated in online learning, and the comments of the participants found that technology largely influenced the participants' motivation. Among the points that were emphasised are the advantages and disadvantages that the participants identified with online learning.

The participants identified the instability of the internet and the lack of technical support as obvious disadvantages when learning online. For example, participants who studied online faced problems with a network of devices and the unavailability of resources on websites, which greatly affected their motivation. Many other studies have also shown that students are troubled by technical issues, making it difficult for them to solve potential problems^[16]. Technical support was discovered to be a key factor when assessing student satisfaction with online classes^[17]. However, the participants agreed that the benefits were that online learning saved them more time, money and they could even start learning whenever and wherever they wanted, which made them happy in a way.

3.5 Influence of the Surrounding Environment

The current study found that the environmental factors surrounding the participants influenced their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The participants in this study stated they were unable to focus on the class all the time, because participants were always distracted by their surroundings, such as the people around them or sudden events. Participants felt that they could not effectively experience their behaviour in an interrupted learning environment and could not perform well in the matter of learning with total attention. Moreover, in the current study, participants indicated that the most important aspect of their studies was their academic performance, which would affect whether they would graduate or have later job opportunities. This reflects the influence of the current academic environment and social environment on the participants. The intangible expectations and requirements for students in the overall academic and social environment may have contributed to this view of the participants, most participants learned in order to be able to earn external rewards. Hence, participants believed that most of the motivation produced in the learning process was extrinsic. Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that extrinsic motivation is an activity conducted in order to achieve a completely separate result and is generated for the value generated by that activity. In a word, although participants showed low motivation in online learning to a large extent, they were willing to complete the learning tasks in order to achieve better academic performance.

4. Conclusion

In order for Chinese international students to be more motivated in online learning, in addition to the need for students to change their negative thinking, overcome communication barriers, and have a stronger will to learn, there is also a need

for active cooperation and support from lecturers and higher education institutions to change the structure of courses that have obvious drawbacks, adopt teaching strategies that fit the online learning environment, increase classroom interaction, and try to meet students' learning needs. In addition, universities are involved in their students' online learning activities by providing some basic resources and changing the structure and curriculum of their courses. Likewise, instructors influence the quality of online courses through their own teaching style, because their teaching strategies and feedback have an effect on students' motivation and positive participation in online courses^[18]. It is evident in this study that some Chinese international students' motivation and class participation are very much influenced by the lecturer's communication and the lecturer's class content, and that the online learning resources provided by the university directly affect students' motivation in online learning. Therefore, this study highlights the influence of lecturers and institutions on students' motivation, and calls for institutions and lecturers to make some appropriate changes in online classes to adjust the learning patterns that make participants feel negative. At the same time, higher education institutions can also consider improving the university's examinations, grade settings, as well as other measures to help stimulate participants' extrinsic motivation. All of this can help participants become more motivated in the online environment and thus improve the quality of their online learning.

The findings of the current study may not only have implications for these participants in higher education in New Zealand, but may also be informative for other international students in higher education in other countries who are studying online. This study as a whole demonstrates the low level of motivation of Chinese international students in higher education in New Zealand in online learning, and in this study, the factors influencing students' motivation, students' suggestions, students' emotional experiences in online learning, and perceived advantages and disadvantages of online learning are similar to those found in most other studies. Thus, this study provides a theoretical reference and comparison in a new national context.

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